

# Azerbaijan: History and Contemporary Politics

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## THE LEGEND OF BAKU'S MAIDEN TOWER (ZOROASTRIAN LEGENDS)

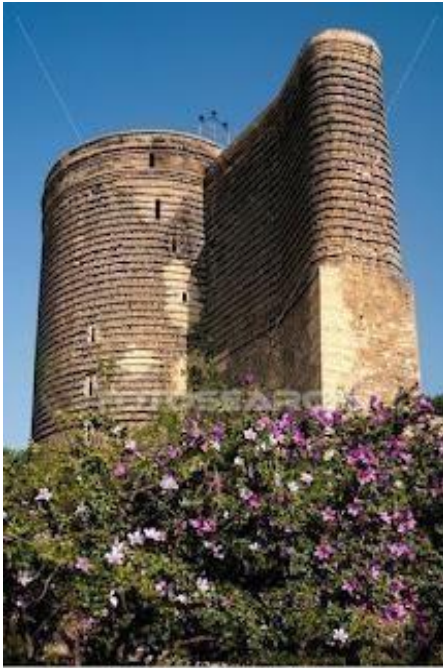
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Baku's Maiden Tower (Qiz qalasi)

**The Maiden Tower** (Azerbaijani: *Qiz qalasi*) is a legendary and world-famous landmark in Baku, Azerbaijan; and since 2001, the tower, along with Baku's Walled City (Old City) and the Palace of Shirvanshahs (Azerbaijani: *Şirvanşahlar Sarayı*), has been included on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

### Background

Numerous scientific sources have confirmed Baku's Maiden Tower as being a paramount example of Zoroastrianism and pre-Islamic architecture in Azerbaijan and Iran. In particular, some archaeological and architectural evidence indicate the tower to be the Holy Fire Temple-Tower of Zoroastrians, dating back to approximately the eighth to seventh century BC. As

scientists argue, the tower had seven fire exits on the top, symbolizing the Zoroastrian "seven steps" or "seven skies" to get to heaven.



Baku's Holy Fire Temple-Tower (Maiden Tower), reconstruction by Prof Davud A.Akhundov

## Legends and mysteries

There exists a rich pool of mysteries and legends related to Baku's Maiden Tower that have come down to the present day. However, some key mysteries remain unresolved: What is the purpose of the tower? Why does the tower have the kind of design it has?

Undoubtedly, the tower is covered by a cloud of legends and epics deeply rooted into Azerbaijan's history, religion, and culture. Some legends have even become the subject of scenarios for ballets and theatre plays that have themselves become part of Azerbaijan's national heritage and identity. In particular, one such play is the Maiden Tower ballet, a world-class Azerbaijani masterpiece created by the Azerbaijani composer Afrasiyab Badalbeyli in 1940, of which a remake was performed in 1999.

Interestingly, up to 20 legends are related to the Maiden Tower, a large number of which connect to Baku's medieval or Islamic period. However, at least two such legends, which have come down to the present day, are deeply rooted in Azerbaijan's Zoroastrian or pre-Islamic period. We believe that the most impressionable and colorful story to come out of Baku's ancient Maiden Tower is the Zoroastrian legend of the virgin girl savior with fire-colored hair.



Baku's Maiden Tower, painting, Tahir Salahov

### Legend of Fire-Color-Haired Virgin Girl Savior

A long time ago, there existed the ancient town-fortress of Atāsh-i Bagawān (note: ancient name of Baku in Pahlavi (?), Old Persian: *bāga* - god; "God's Fire"). The fortress had a Fire Temple-Tower. At one point in Atāsh-i Bagawan's history, the enemy managed to encircle the fortress. The enemy requested that Atāsh-i Bagawān's people surrender, but they refused. Consequently, the enemy launched a siege to demolish the fortress and capture all the inhabitants into slavery. As a result, many fortress defenders died while attempting to stop the enemy's attacks.

The enemy's commander ordered the cutting of water supply lines in an attempt to overthrow the fortress's defenders. Everybody in the fortress was thirsty. They had no water, nor food only blood and death. The Magupat (note: chief priest or Master of the Magi, Pahlavi: *Maguš*) together with the other mowbeds (Pahlavi: *mgwpt*, Persian: موبد, priests) prayed to the Holy Fire that was kept in the fortress's Fire Temple- Tower, asking the God Ahura Mazdā to help and protect people. They prayed day by day and night by night, appealing to the All-Mighty and Merciful Ahura Mazdā to save their lives and push back the enemy.

Finally, Ahura Mazdā heard the Magi and people's prayers. One day, people saw a large piece of the Holy Fire falling from the top of the Fire Temple-Tower. A beautiful girl came up from the fire. She had long fire-colored hair. The crowd went down on their knees and started to pray to her. The girl said, not worry. I am here to help and protect you! Give me a sword and helmet! The enemy must not see my girl's hair. Open a fortress gate!"

Meanwhile, the enemy commander was waiting outside for a one-on-one fight with the fortress pahlevan. If the fortress pahlevan were to win the fight, the enemy's army would subsequently

back away. However, if the enemy commander were to win, the fortress would be destroyed, and the surviving inhabitants would be enslaved.

The fortress gate opened, and the enemy commander saw that the pahlevan is coming to fight. The heavy battle began. In one of the god-blessing moments that ensued, the fortress pahlevan unhorsed the enemy and put a knife directly on his neck. The enemy commander screamed, "You win! Who are you? Take your helmet off. I want to see your face, Pahlevan!" He took off the helmet and saw that the fortress pahlevan was a beautiful girl with long, fire-colored hair. He exclaimed, "Oh, you are a girl! You are a brave and beautiful girl! If the girls of your fortress are so brave, I will never capture it! Do not kill me, beauty!"

He fell in love with her because of her beauty and bravery. He asked her to marry him. Surely, the girl did not kill him. She fell in love with him too because of his open heart.

In the end, the enemy did not capture the fortress, and the locals named the tower as the Maiden Tower.

### **Legend of Holy Virgin Girl Savior**

Long ago, the fortress city of Bād-kube (note: means "city where the wind blows", another old name of Baku, in Persian: بادکوبه) was besieged by the enemy. Bād-kube had three lines of defense walls, but they had all been encircled by the enemy.

The siege continued for more than ninety days. Inside the fortress, close to the sea, there was a high and black steaming tower temple, in which old Zoroastrian rituals were performed to save the Holy Fire. The temple's supreme mowbed (Magupat/ chief priest or Master Magi, Pahlavi: *Maguš*) Egirwand executed old fire rituals, proclaiming to the worshipers: "Tomorrow, the Shah will be killed by the unknown and virginal power."

Suddenly, the temple door was opened and a virgin girl with flaming hair came out. She was illuminated by the temple's holy fire and held a flaming sword in her hands. Covered by the flame, she exited the temple and stood by the principal mowbed (Magupat). The Magupat said, "You must save the Holy City, a capital of eternal fires, and save the Tower that created you!"

Thus, the moonfaced flaming girl looked for the last time on the temple-tower and went into battle against General Nureddin and his troops. She kept her promise and saved her countrymen. But she fell in love with the enemy general, whom she killed by her sword. However, she killed herself as well, stabbing her own shoulder with the sword and giving her soul to the Holy Fire Temple. After her death, the winds of Khazri and Gilavar blew strongly for seven days. Since then, the Temple's fires have stopped burning, and the Temple was named the Maiden Tower (*Qiz Qalasi*) after the holy virgin girl savior.

### **Legend of Why Baku Tower's Fires Stopped Burning**

Once upon a time, the enemy besieged the fortress of Bād-kube. However, Bād-kube's people refused to give up. They decided to fight to the end and defend their lives. They fought with great bravery, but the situation inside the fortress increasingly worsened. The enemy launched a

tight siege to overthrow the defenders and cut off their water supply. Meanwhile, the supreme Magi (*Maguš*) and other priests prayed to the All-Mighty God Ahura Mazdā in the fortress's Holy Fire Temple-Tower. They prayed to Ahura Mazdā for help.

After several days of the nonstop praying, Ahura Mazdā heard the priests' and Magi's blessings. A strong and devastating earthquake occurred, perishing the enemy troops. Thus, the All-Mighty Ahura Mazdā destroyed the enemy and Bād-kube's people escaped slavery, but the Holy Fires stopped burning on top of Bād-kube's Fire Temple-Tower.

### **Comments: Why is Baku's Tower Named the Maiden Tower?**

Intriguingly, except for the legendary background, no historical explanation or archaeological or written evidence describes why the tower was named the Maiden Tower. In this case, we have to explore possible religious explanations.

Indeed, we believe that the tower is named the Maiden Tower because it was never destroyed by the enemy. From the religious perspective, that means that the temple was never humiliated or desecrated by evil/ Ahriman (Avestan: *Angra/Aṇra Mainyu*). Therefore, if the tower wasn't desecrated by enemy/evil (Ahriman), so it would continue to be a "virgin" (untouched) - hence, a "Maiden" Tower-Temple of Zoroastrian God Ahura Mazdā.



4th-6th century silver and gilt Sassanian vessel, assumed to be depicting Goddess Anahita,  
(Cleveland Museum of Art, PA, USA)



In the meantime, there is an unconfirmed hypothesis that Baku's Maiden Tower is named a "Maiden" because the temple possibly is dedicated to two associated deities, Fire and Anāhitā and so it is Ādur-Anāhīd or Fire of Anāhitā. The goddess Anāhitā is one of the major divinities in Zoroastrianism and is the goddess of purity, fertility, healing, wisdom, and water "she who possesses waters". Notably, the tower was built close to the water - on the shore of the Caspian Sea. Additionally, it should be noted, that Greek geographer Strabo mentioned that the people of Arrān (Caucasian Albania) revered the goddess of moon and fertility Anāhitā – Selenā.

Interestingly, Sasanian King Shāpūr I (r. 240-270 CE) established many Bāhram fires for his soul Xusraw Šāhbūhr and his daughter Xusraw Ādur-Anāhīd in Ērānšahr (Iran) and surrounding lands.

Indeed, the tower has visible signs of the Sasanian construction methods, which are the same as in the fire temple in Ādur Gušnasp in Azerbaijan (Pahlavi: *Ādurbādagān*), (now Azar Goshnasp Fire Temple complex in Takht-e Soleyman, West Azerbaijan province, Iran) and in Darband fortress in Arrān (Caucasian Albania).

Thus, it should not be excluded from our considerations that the Tower may have been dedicated to the Zoroastrian Virgin Goddess of Anāhitā, whose name was preserved till modern days as the Maiden (Virgin) Tower.

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